

I am the person you do not want to be. I live a parent's worst nightmare. The nightmare does not go away and the saying that time heals all wounds is greatly overrated.

On December 1, 1997 a fourteen-year-old boy took his thoughts and feelings- the sum total of the influences on his life, and five guns into Heath High School. After watching children pray, he opened fire on those who had bowed their heads. Eight shots fired- eight children hit in the upper chest, neck or head. Kayce, Jessica and Nicole died that day. So did our country's false belief that small towns are safe from senseless violence. In our 'information age' we must accept the fact that children can easily access the best and the worst our modern technology has to offer.

We believe the Heath shooter was influenced by the movies he watched, the video games he played, and the Internet sites he used.

One of the first indicators of media influence is that none of his shots missed. From the criminal investigation we know of only one time prior to the shootings that the killer practiced with the gun he used to commit murder. A recent case in the news involved a man shot at close range by police officers. Of the 41 shots he fired, 19 hit the victim. Less than half of the shots fired by trained policemen hit their target, but 100% of those fired by a teen-ager hit students in the 'kill zone'. Studies show that video games are an excellent tool for improving the hand-eye coordination required for such accurate marksmanship. The location of the shots shows that he was definitely shooting to kill. The fact that the shooter used the most effective methods of shooting, one shot per victim instead of shooting until they fell, is also a learned skill.

Violent video games and movies desensitize users to the violence by making it sterile. Blood on the screen has no odor and it cannot be touched. Screams are controlled by the volume button. Gore is controlled by the on/off button. Death is controlled by the restart button. When the user continues with violence he is rewarded. Video games earn points, sometimes bonus points for extra blood and guts. Movies show that people who shoot faster and kill more survive and become heroes. And their acne is cleared up to boot. The victims have no families that love them. The closest thing to consequences in these videos and movies is another figure that tries to revenge the deaths. In the rare instances that a victim's funeral is shown, the killer is often there to savor his 'victory'. In our case, the murderer intended to return to school

the next day and be admired for his 'bravery'. Violent porn says that girls deserve to be treated brutally and that all women secretly want to be hurt and domineered.

Some question if the media can really have that much influence on young people. Every business owner counts on media influencing people- it's called advertising. The advertising industry is nearly as large as the media industry. The two work so closely together that sometimes it's difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. Companies pay thousands of dollars for a few seconds to get their ideas across. Thirty or sixty seconds influences what soft drink we buy, or which candidate we vote for.

The media has known for decades how to condition people. We automatically categorize people as rich, poor, sophisticated, simple, extravagant, practical, urban, or rural by their vehicles or clothes. As a young girl, even before I started school, I knew who the bad guys were on TV by the color of their hats and I knew when to hide my eyes by the sound of the music. Companies began cashing in on the media effect by developing and promoting products based on movies, TV shows, sports figures and music groups. Even fast food restaurants jumped on the bandwagon by featuring media-based toys in kids' meals. Some of the action figure toys marketed for children as young as 4 are based on movies rated 'R'.

As early as the 1960's the media effect was recognized as so great that public outcry helped force bans on TV advertising of tobacco and alcohol products. Are we to believe that a 30-second commercial will influence us, but 90 minutes of violence will not?

Moms were the first to notice that their children acted more aggressively after watching violence on TV. Soon science followed with study after study that proved mom right. Today studies show that there are physical changes in the brain, changes actually documented by brain scanners, after witnessing violence. Many of these changes are most pronounced in adolescent brains.

Self-help promoters have often told us to send ourselves positive messages. They say the brain does not place a value judgment on what it hears. Therefore, basically if a person hears that he is good, self-confident, or calm more than he hears he is bad, shy, or angry, then he will be good, self-confident, and calm. It's the quantity that counts. Makes some sense. But what happens when a loving, nurturing adult believes that quality is more important than the quantity of time spent with their child. That little boy or girl, too young to have had the self-help class, is often guided by the media that promotes conflict resolution by fighting and by whose worth is

determined by the bigger gun.

Does this put the blame back onto the parents? Not completely. Actually, there is enough guilt to go around. We do not blame parents for serving their child a hamburger made with meat they did not know was contaminated. Yes, the parent should smell the hamburger before cooking it, but meat that looks and smells fine can have enough bacteria in it to cause serious illness to anyone eating it. Parents are not expected to be scientists, chemists, or doctors. Parents have to depend on those professionals and they have to be able to expect adequate warnings if a product is not safe.

Movies, video games and web sites are manufactured products of the entertainment industry. The same product liability standards that apply to any other manufacturer are the standards we expect of movie, game, and website producers. The United States is committed to the rights of free enterprise. We must be just as committed to demanding that the obligations that go with the rights be treated with equal respect. Any person or company that manufactures and markets a product is responsible for harm that comes from the use of the product. The same standard holds true if the product influences a person to harm himself or others. Carmakers learned to make safer cars partly as a result of product liability cases. By holding violent '??entertainment' ?? to the same standards we are taking steps to keep us all safer. The industry does not have to worry about us infringing on their first amendment rights. Let them make films, games, or websites as violent or pornographic as they wish. We do not ask them to conform to any standard of decency. We expect them to be accountable when their product cause harm to others. Often, pocketbooks are easier to interpret than obscenity laws.

Our forefathers determined years ago that civil lawsuits are our country' ??s method of holding people and companies accountable for their actions. Please help us continue with our right to expect accountability for our little girls' ?? deaths by affirming belief in our system of justice. If our lawsuit is seen as a first amendment case rather than the accountability case that it is, then our daughters will have suffered another miscarriage of justice.

America is an addicted society. We are addicted to whatever feels good for the moment. Instant gratification is our norm. Drive-by banking, drive-by restaurants, drive-by shootings. Faster modems, faster cars, faster childhoods. We are addicted to denial. Don' ??t look, don' ??t tell. Don' ??t get involved. Don' ??t believe anything you read. The pace is slower at the cemetery. There' ??s plenty of time to think, to remember, to wonder what might have been while rearranging plastic flowers.

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